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A taste of the good life

UK farm teaches about community and food

By Megan Boehnke
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With his hands buried in rows of beans, Mark Williams can see -- just above the vineyards and the greenhouses -- Wal-Mart.

And as he snaps each pod off the plant, he can hear the Nicholasville Road traffic bustling by on the other side of the tree line.

The University of Kentucky has sold off a little more than half of its South Farm in recent decades, and development encroaches on the remaining parcel. But in the back corner of that 100 acres, Williams found a place for his brainchild.

The organic farm, part of UK's new sustainable agriculture curriculum, serves two functions: Half is used for students' research and half for growing produce, which for the first time is being sold to UK staff members and students this summer.



CHARLES BERTRAM | STAFF

On distribution day, subscribers to the UK farm's program pick up a selection of freshly picked vegetables and flowers. Photo by Charles Bertram | Staff



FOR MORE INFO

UK Community Supported Agriculture program

Participants in the food subscription have to be UK students, faculty or staff members and can subscribe for only two years before they are asked to join a different program in the area. The reason for the limitations, said director Mark Williams, is to prevent UK's program from taking business from local farmers.

To find out more about the organic food program or to volunteer on the farm, call Williams at (859) 257-2638 or e-mail mark.williams@uky.edu.

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Sustainable agriculture isn't about just organic farming, Williams said, but rather about building a community around the food. Those who eat that food meet the farmers who harvest it. And supporting farmers by eating locally is one way to preserve the 85,000 small family farms across the state.

Big gains in only a few years

When graduate student Audrey Law first left her potato farming experiment and wandered down to the back corner of the South Farm several years ago, she was intrigued. She started contributing to projects involving her area of study -- soil biology -- and offered her time to anything else that needed to be done.

Now, as she wraps up her doctorate, she's still washing vegetables in the large basins and doing what she can to lend a hand -- though now she's one of many. There are the four apprentices, two graduate students, and many more volunteers who help out just because it's fun.

"Four or five years ago, when I started, this was all bare and it was all just an idea," she said. "It's exciting to watch. In the beginning, I would help out here or there; now it's kind of taken on a life of its own."

Four years ago, Kentucky had an abundance of farmers looking for something to replace their tobacco crops following the federal buyout. Organic farming was gaining national attention both in and outside the world of farming. So when Williams, then an assistant professor, talked to colleagues and administrators, it didn't take much to convince them that a sustainable agriculture program was worth the investment.

"Our farming population is aging and kids are not following in their family's footsteps," Williams said. The decline in students interested in farming, along with the tobacco buyout and dwindling petroleum resources used in agriculture, has been "making people think about where we are and where we are going, and how we can maintain agriculture systems in the future," he said.

The point of the sustainable-agriculture program is to educate an "agriculturally illiterate" population across the country.

"People have no idea where their food comes from," Williams said. "We're teaching people not only how to farm, but how to be supportive of farmers."

Crew shares food, fellowship

Law is one of six people in the large shed by midday, washing, bundling and storing the chard as it comes in. No one seems to realize they're actually doing work as they talk about their science teachers, a local tomato grower, and what's for lunch.

Right about then, a pickup pulls up and several more students and volunteers pull fresh basil off the tailgate, and the aroma triggers growling stomachs.

Every Thursday is distribution day, when UK's Community Supported Agriculture subscribers come to pick up their weekly produce. Thursday is also the day the crew -- along with some visitors from other parts of the farm, the college or even the family of those working -- indulges in a big lunch. Today, it's green beans with dill, a vegetable hash, wilted chard and for dessert, just-picked cantaloupe and watermelon.

"It's the whole roundness of it, growing it together, picking it together, preparing it together," said Jessica Ballard, one of the apprentices. "We're really sharing and that's what fellowship is."

Regular volunteers on the farm include architecture students who spent time working on the shed and landscaping; they continue to come out on Thursdays just for the fun of distribution day. There's also an entomology student, Andy Joseph, who has a project on another part of the farm. When he sets his experiment up for the day, it needs very little attention, providing him with extra energy for washing vegetables.

"I love it out here; it's beautiful. And everyone out here is just really dear to me," Ballard said. "And the benefits are good -- we can eat all the fresh organic food we want to."

Williams wants to find more ways to extend the enthusiasm on the farm to those in the community. That might mean field days to allow school groups and Lexington residents to see what goes on at the farm, workshops for local farmers and gardeners, and inviting



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more people to volunteer on the farm.

"There is this nurturing side of it, this connection to the soil that's accessible to anyone," Williams said. "It's pretty phenomenal our opportunity to connect with people on this land."

Vegetables and flower bouquet

On distribution day, the beans and tomatoes picked the day before and the squash, chard and fennel picked that morning are now on the tables set up in front of Good Barn, across from Commonwealth Stadium. As staff and faculty get off work and students make their way to and from campus, they stop by the tent to gather their vegetables for the week.

Two people stop by to purchase food from what they think is a local farmer selling at a roadside stand. Mark Keating, a lecturer in the sustainable agriculture program, explains the subscription program and that those picking up the produce have already signed up and paid for it. When there are extra vegetables, he will offer them.

"I have nothing but respect for someone who sees fresh food and stops," said Keating, who handles the promotion and distribution of the food in the program.

He knows most of the people who come to collect their shares this afternoon. He asks about mutual acquaintances and recipes they've tried, and explains to them what some of the more unusual peppers are. He makes sure everyone gets their allotment of vegetables, a bouquet of wildflowers and a newsletter that includes recipes for how to cook some of the week's selections. There are 45 shares this summer, all of which sold within two weeks of hanging posters around campus.

"We're just trying to do what we know works and we know we can produce delicious, nutritious, satisfying food," Keating said.



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